

Karen A. Michaud

# Shenandoah National Park

## A Sense of Place

*Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part, and must address itself to the whole man rather than any phase.*

Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*

On September 27, 1997 over 30 veterans of 10 Civilian Conservation Corps camps affiliated with the Skyline Drive and Shenandoah National Park (1933-1942) helped to dedicate the bronze plaque honoring the placement of the Skyline Drive Historic District into the National Register of Historic Places. Photo by Nick Longworth, Shenandoah Volunteer-in-Parks.

Shenandoah was established as a national park to bring the concept of *national park*, in the western sense, to the large population centers of the East. Not having natural phenomena like geysers or mile-deep canyons as a focusing wonder of nature, the park was promoted for its spectacular views from mountaintops, across park lands, to rural landscapes beyond the park boundaries. A modern roadway system permitted the burgeoning urban middle class with “a car in every garage” to visit this natural world of second- and third-growth forest and enjoy the Skyline Drive, invigorating walks, and amenable, if rustic, services.

For much of Shenandoah National Park’s history, the story of the park was provided by park naturalists who created inspirational programs about the glories of nature as it reclaimed areas that were once called home by some 4,000 former residents. However, some of the park media—nature trails and interpretive signs—that depicted the story of former mountain residents were strongly influenced by the demeaning and slanted reports of Miriam Sizer, educator and social worker, in 1929-30, and later by Mandel Sherman in his *Hollow Folk* (1933). Social mores of the time

accepted as valid and complete these writers’ depictions of the mountain residents as backwoods and hillbilly. Then, buried by the fast-paced social upheavals of the progressing 20th century, the true story remained dormant as the park tried to deal with the pressures of environmental threats.

For many years, even the best intentioned attempts to present a balanced view of the former park residents promoted generalizations which sustained the demeaning image—or worse, a defensiveness about past actions. One such interpretive wayside—which has since been removed—attempted to paint the residents of a particular hollow as diverse citizens:

Some mountain families lived in miserable shacks; others had neat, comfortable homes. Some lacked the barest necessities; others had small luxuries .... Some areas were known for being outside the law; others had the reputation of being law abiding. Some mountain people were illiterate and virtually unaware of the outside world; others read the local papers and wrote articulate letters-to-the-editor.

While aiming to present a balanced picture, this wayside offered two photographs of rather untended log and frame cabins and only one of a more “middle class,” two-story frame house with stone chimney and fenced yard. As a result, viewers were moved more toward the concept of the mountain people as hillbillies—a concept that the wayside exhibit was supposed to dismiss.

Other park media, such as the film *The Gift*, shown at Byrd Visitor Center, also left viewers with the sense of the less-than-desirable hillbilly, not so much in what was said as in the way the material was presented. The film narration was supported by music and still life portraits which left the viewer with an impression of a destitute people unwilling or unable to better their lives.

However, the printed media was responsible for the largest dissemination of this image of poor, destitute, and unintelligent people. Books as well as hundreds of articles in newspapers and magazines maintained the myth that these folk had abused the land, laid barren the mountaintops, and destroyed the soil by bad farming practices. Very often the photographs accompanying the articles showed homes that to modern eyes seem like rundown shacks, with or without barefooted children and surly adults.

Today, in a new age, a truer story of the mountain people is beginning to emerge. Shenandoah National Park passed its 50th anniversaries of authorization and establishment (1976, 1985) during a period of an emerging new social consciousness. Social historians began studying the lives of people who were not the



famous or the powerful. This new focus encouraged a respect for all elements of American society. Interest in genealogy soared. New national parks memorialized social movements and cultural stories as well as famous individuals and events. Educational institutions incorporated this new social history and also encouraged a new sensitivity to discrimination perpetuated through use of language. In this climate, personnel in Shenandoah National Park realized that the standard stories and photographs of the mountain residents had largely been created by those who had a bias: the social workers and census takers who were sent to take stock of, and set value on, the homes and properties for the purpose of purchase, by condemnation if necessary.

Interpreters have made some changes in the past several years. They have replaced the patronizing and loaded language about the mountain people in all printed media that are sent to the park for editing. So far this has amounted to over 200 publications on the open market. The park also has received a grant to rewrite the script of *The Gift* with the help of the Children of Shenandoah, an organization of descendants of former park residents and interested academics.

At the same time that the most egregious errors and demeaning language are being replaced, researchers continue to look for the true stories of the former mountain residents and the condition of the land during the decades before the national park's establishment. Valid and reliable research is slow in coming, and a great deal of work lies ahead. The impulse to take small bits of information and leap to other generalizations must be constantly fought. As research progresses, the park, through concessioner and cooperating association, produces articles that integrate these new findings within the context of an urban and rural society in Virginia in the early-20th century.

In addition to having valid information, the park needed to focus on themes that are based upon its resources. Interpreters at Shenandoah National Park took a hard look again at the park's enabling legislation and the significance this park has acquired within the last 60 years. The story of this park is a fascinating one when the social, economic, technological, and environmental forces of the 20th century are brought into play. Opportunities to study, understand, and appreciate the decisions we make today have parallels in the decisions that were made in the 1920s and 1930s. The previous practice, which demeaned and negated the values and lifestyle of the former mountain residents, should give us fair warning about generalizations that attempt to give credence to differing sets of values.

Most important of all, the park's interpretive themes are an integration of both the natural and cultural resources in the park, and these themes are

told in a context that allows visitors to appreciate this national park as a perpetual place for learning and enjoying. For example, the creation of the park and the resulting displacement of mountain residents were influenced by the human endeavors of business, economics, transportation, and the growth of cities. In addition, natural disasters such as chestnut blight and drought had enormous influence on the movement of residents and the development of social relief activities and agencies.

Additionally, the building of a national park by thousands of unemployed CCC boys during the depression of the 1930s provided the natural landscapes. And the amenities, built by the park concessioner, drew the newly mobile urbanites back to the simplicity of nature. Skyline Drive Historic District, which has recently been added to the National Register of Historic Places, helps us to explore the development of the social concepts of leisure and nature.

At the same time, the natural resources of the park—its forests and streams, peaks and hollows, and abundant wildlife—continue to provide spiritual renewal and recreational opportunities to 2 million visitors a year. More recently, the park as a green space has become an important indicator of area and East Coast environmental health. The natural resources have been, and are, assaulted by non-native species, such as the gypsy moth and the woolly adelgid, that threaten major loss or even extermination of certain species of trees. Park specialists measure air pollution levels and document the damage to plants, water quality, and water wildlife. Also, the park has successfully, if precariously, reintroduced peregrine falcons. The current resource management decisions, both within the park and within the greater communities that share this ecosystem, will influence the natural and cultural stories of the area.

Today, the major interpretive themes demand the telling of all of these stories. As they seek to incorporate the true and more complete cultural history into the park's themes, interpreters today are trying to achieve the goal of all interpretation: to present valid information in its accurate context and to encourage visitors' discovery of concepts within their own values, ideas, and meanings. Thus, the interpretation of Shenandoah National Park seeks to facilitate each visitor's search for his and her "sense of place."

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